LITTLE BLUE BOOK NO. 1569
Edited by E. Haldeman-Julius

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BOCCACCIO—LOVER AND CHRONICLER OF LOVE

Three divergently luminous writers, contemporaries, practically speaking, open up the literature of the modern world. All of them, Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, were Florentines either by birth or antecedent associations. The fostering of this mighty triumvirate in the period embracing the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries vouchsafes to Florence a cultural eminence and heritage that had not been vested in any community since the classical triumph that culminated in ancient Athens at the height of its glory.

In the life of every great creative artist there is usually some outstanding personality that brings to bear an all-prevailing influence upon the sensibilities of the artistic constitution. In the life of Dante it was *Beatrice;* of Petrarch, *Laura;* and of Boccaccio, the lovely *Fiammetta* proved the inspiration which dominated a large part of his life, colored practically all his art, and shaped the tendencies of his genius. While referring to *Fiammetta*, it will not be amiss to point out that Boccaccio always found unusual names, beautiful names, for the women of his heart—and of his dreams.

Of these three preeminently creative artists of the Renaissance, as John Addington Symonds reminds us, Dante was first, Petrarch second, and Boccaccio third in force of character and quality of genius. Yet the fact remains that Boccaccio did vastly more than his superiors to mould and influence Italian, and indirectly, all Western literature. While all three

were held in great measure by the past, Boccaccio was the one whose temperament and favorite forms of art anticipated the future. He alone of the three grew with the growing age in his substitution of sensual and concrete for mythical and abstract ideals, in his joyous acceptance of nature and the world, in his frank abandonment of theological, scholastic and political preoccupations. The *Decameron* catches and crystalizes "the legends of a hundred generations, dimly floating in the memories of man, and raises them to the plane of clear, self-conscious art, thereby inaugurating a form of prose-narrative which in the novel has supplanted epic poetry" (Symonds).

Boccaccio, in the English-speaking world, is almost synonymous with the *Decameron*—undoubtedly the greatest of his works—but he was the author of numerous volumes of distinguished prose and poetry in Latin and Tuscan. The versatility of his genius is further evidenced in the fact that his works on biography, history, geography and mythology were encyclopaedic. The importance of these endeavors as an influence in the Revival of Learning can scarcely be estimated at this time. They were, in fact, the first attempts at a compilation of Dictionaries of Biography, History, Geography and Mythology, and served as popular text books of classical erudition. The foremost scholars of his day lauded these monumental compilations, whereas appreciation of the *Decameron* and his amorous poems came largely from the pleasure-seeking aristocrats and literary dilettante.

Comparatively late in life, Boccaccio took up Greek and in collaboration with Leontius Pilatus, a Calabrian-Greek adventurer, he translated Homer into Latin, thus introducing the Father of Poetry to Western Europe in the language of scholarship of that period. For this performance alone, he won the unstinted gratitude of Petrarch, who said that Homer in the original was dumb to him while he was deaf to Homer.

From the time of his literary apprenticeship in adolescence until his career closed in 1375, in the seventh decade of life, Boccaccio was a prodigious writer, possessing imagination, originality and vigor. Some of his shortcomings, literary and otherwise, will be alluded to later in this treatise. Above all, he lived and loved abundantly, if not—referring to the latter—always wisely.

It is significant that many of the great masters of world literature that followed borrowed liberally from Boccaccio in form, manner and matter. Among those who paid Boccaccio the tribute of borrowing from him were Chaucer, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Dryden, Keats and others in England; Estienne, de Troyes and La Fontaine in France; Straparola, Sansovino and Sacchetti and many more in Italy; Goethe, Hans Sachs, Burger, Lessing, in Germany—even Luther made use of some of the *Decameron* stories in his *Tischreden;* and popular Spanish and other European writers, including the inevitable Scandinavian, took some leaves and not a few stories from the great Florentine master's books.

At the beginning of an age that was to furnish the machinations of the Medici, Machiavelli and the Borgias, and others of their kidney, there was the need of a neutralizing influence, if not, indeed, an antidote. And Boccaccio, to the extent of a single individual's capabilities, supplied this in his works brimming with the humanizing spirit of life, love, laughter and tolerance.

Even the majestic but often sombre mysticism of Dante needed as a social complement such an interpreter of human nature as Boccaccio to lighten the mental and spiritual birth-pains of the Renaissance. The *Decameron* has been called the *Commedia Umana*, quite appropriately, as Dante's masterpiece is called the *Commedia Divina*. J. A. Symonds remarks that the great poem and the great prose fiction of the fourteenth century are opposed to each other as Masque and Anti-Masque. "The world of the *Decameron* is not an inverted world, like that of Aristophanes. It does not antithesize Dante's world by turning it upside down. It is simply the same world surveyed from another side, unaltered, uninverted, but viewed in the superficies, presented in the concrete."

Boccaccio, christened Giovanni, spent his boyhood in Florence, the home of his forbears. He learned to read and write at an early age, and was given a primary education calculated to fit him for his father's counting house. Indeed, he did enter his father's establishment, where he was initiated into the mysteries of account-keeping and money-lending—and quick-

ly learned to hate the whole business. When Boccaccio, *pere*, found Giovanni set against a commercial career, he encouraged him to study canon law—likewise as a money-making enterprise—which proved equally unsuited to the poetic soul.

While residing in Naples in his early manhood, where his father had sent him in the forlorn hope of stimulating his interest in mercantile affairs, Giovanni came definitely in touch with Italian and French men of letters, including the already renowned Petrarch. The court of King Robert of Anjou was frequented by the literary notables and sophisticates of the day, and it was inevitable that Boccaccio should soon find his element in this congenial environment. For several years he lived in the atmosphere of this gay court, enlivened by the wit of some of the most illustrious men of his time, and embellished by the beauty of their women.

INSPIRED AT VIRGIL'S TOMB

Filippo Villani, a contemporary writer, relates a story of an incident in Boccaccio's life, to which he attaches much significance. In any event there seems to be something about it more than colorful fancy, and suggests one of those inspired epochal moments that now and then becomes the turning point in the life of groping genius. We read from Villani:

> After wandering through many lands, now here, now there, as his commercial engagements prompted, he reached the age of twenty-five, when his father's orders led him to take up his abode in Naples. There it chanced one day he walked forth alone, and came to the spot where Virgil's dust lies

buried. At the sight of this sepulchre, Giovanni fell into long musing admiration of the man whose bones it covered, brooded with meditative soul upon the poet's fame, until he fell to lamenting his own fortune, whereby he was compelled against his will to give himself to irksome cares of business. A sudden love of the Pierian Muses smote his heart, and turning homeward he abandoned trade, devoting himself with passionate ardor to poetry; wherein, very shortly, aided alike by his noble genius and his burning desire for knowledge, he made marvelous progress. This when his father noticed, and perceived that Heaven-sent instinct had more power with his son than the parental will, he consented to his studies, and helped him with such assistance as lay within his means.

The first contact of two individuals from which bursts forth a love that leaves its impress upon the ages is more often than not a momentous occasion—at least, with the passing of time and the rounding out of the subjective overtones into an imposing perspective, it gains that measure of importance. Such was the meeting of Boccaccio and *Fiammetta.* It was Holy Saturday, on the 30th of March, 1331, in the Church of San Lorenzo, that the impressionable Giovanni saw for the first time the object of his adoration, Marie, the natural daughter of King Robert, whom he immortalized as *Fiammetta*—"the little flame"—in the most exquisite creation of his muse. Boccaccio's passionate love upon seeing her was instantaneous, and presumably was reciprocated with some ardor by the lady.

As the poet himself expressed it, "while I stood there listening to the Holy Mass celebrated by a priest . . . there appeared to my eyes the wondrous beauty of a young woman, come thither to hear that which I too heard

attentively. I had no sooner seen her than my heart began to throb so strongly that I felt it in my slightest pulses; and not knowing why nor yet perceiving what had happened, I began to say, 'Ohime, what is this?' . . . But at length, being unable to sate myself with gazing, I said, 'O Love, most noble Lord, whose strength not even the gods were able to resist, I thank thee for setting happiness before my eyes!' . . . I had no sooner said these words than the flashing eyes of that lovely lady fixed themselves on mine . . ."

Fiammetta, we are told, was tall and slender; her hair so blonde that the "world held nothing like it," if we may believe the superlatives of the infatuated lover; it shaded a white forehead of noble width, beneath which were the curves of two black and most slender eyebrows . . . and under these two roguish eyes, cheeks of no other color than milk. On that day she was dressed in *bruna vesta*, and wearing a veil that fell from her head crowned with a garland. After her golden hair, it was her eyes and mouth with which he fell in love—eyes and mouth whose unfathomable feminine mysteries he was intimately to enjoy and explore, if only in the end to go down to inevitable masculine defeat in attempting to unravel their tantalizing secrets.

When she saw that he continued to stare at her, she screened herself with her veil—undoubtedly a coquettish gesture to further stimulate his interest! He changed his position and found a place by a column whence he could see her very well—and there, while the priest sang

the Office, he drank in her blonde beauty which the dark clothes made more splendid, crowned by the golden hair, which made a fitting frame for the milk-like skin, the shining eyes and the mouth that contrasted like a rose in a field of lilies. Once again she looked at him; so he stayed where he was till the service was over, and then joined his companions, waiting with them at the door to see the girls pass out. It was then that he once more saw her as she made her way out of San Lorenzo on her way home.

The morrow, Easter Sunday, Boccaccio again went to San Lorenzo to see her only. She was there, indeed, adorned with gems and dressed in luxurious green, more beautiful than ever, beautiful both by nature and by art.

Then in a retrospective, mystic mood, he said to himself: "This is that lady who in my boyhood, and again not so long ago appeared to me in my dreams; this is she who, with a joyful countenance and gracious, welcomed me to this city; this is she who was ordained to rule my mind, and who was promised me in my dreams." From this moment began for him the new life, the episode curiously paralleling in its emotional implications the experience at Virgil's tomb, but springing from erotic rather than egoistic urges.

And who was the beautiful *Fiammetta*, the now quite legendary lady who, unconsciously, did so much to influence and mould the tendencies of the literature of the Renaissance and, indirectly, of the whole modern world?

She is thought to be, and in all probability

was, the daughter of King Robert of Naples, by the personable wife of one D'Aquino, a member of the royal court. Considerable mystery surrounds the birth of *Fiammetta*. Boccaccio suggests that her birth is connected with the great *Festa* which celebrated the coronation of King Robert at Avignon in September, 1309. The chief feature of the celebration was a magnificent banquet, to which all the court and many of the leading subjects of the Kingdom were bidden. Amid all this splendor a witness describes the king's gaze passing over a host of beautiful women, to rest, always with new delight, on the beauty of the young wife of D'Aquino, who, since her husband belonged to the court, was present. A little later, as the story goes, the king succeeded in seducing the lady, and as the child was born after the proper lapse of time, His Majesty believed himself to be the father. It appears that D'Aquino also believed himself to be the pater in fact as well as in name.

This love-child, named Marie, lost her mother at a tender age, and was placed in a convent. There she grew up, vivacious and sensuous, totally unfitted for the life of a nun, which for a time she thought she wished to become, especially after an ecstatic vision in which St. Scholastic appeared to her and invited her to take the vows. Happily this was not to be. Already the fame of her beauty had gone beyond the convent walls. Soon she received offers of marriage, and among the suitors there was one whom she accepted. Well developed and voluptuously mature, she was

married at the age of fifteen to a young man whose name has been lost in the shifting sands of time.

With her marriage and advent into the world, Marie's fame as a beauty grew, and the sensuousness of her nature thrived on the attentions paid to her by the gallants of the court. Furthermore, her husband's house, we are told, was in such a position that passers-by might spy at her window or on her balcony. It is not difficult to imagine how surreptitiously popular the foreground of her balcony became.

With her ardent temperament and the universal admiration that was bestowed upon her, Marie flitted from one episode of love to another. She excused herself for having betrayed the husband who loved her so devotedly by saying, "What is lawfully pursued is apt to be considered of small account, even though it is most excellent, but what is difficult of attainment, even if contemptible, is held in high esteem." Such was the beautiful and fickle blonde, *Fiammetta*, whom Boccaccio, with many others, adored.

Fiammetta, with supreme mastery of the arts and artifices of the coquette, gave the youthful Giovanni only enough encouragement to fan the embers of hope, without permitting him the opportunity for anything approaching intimacy. Patronized by the highest and mightiest of the Royal Court, she could the better impress the ardent but relatively unimportant youth by an air of aloofness, tempered with some friendly notice upon formal occasions.

But these tactics, as perhaps *Fiammetta* well knew, only kindled Boccaccio's desire and developed a passion that early surrender would never have achieved. His thoughts constantly centered upon her. He praised her in extravagant verses, and whenever possible wrote adoring letters to her. Afterwards, in contemplating his dilemma, he referred to the new lordship of love when "I desired to know what power splendid words had to move human hearts."

The unconquered lady of his heart made frequent trips to the country, and in other ways absented herself and put distance and time between them. Then, too, he had to be careful not to arouse the suspicions of her husband. Giovanni did manage to see her occasionally in church, or at her window, or in her garden, and once followed her out of the city, but was unable to approach her, and saw her only from a distance.

He fluctuated between wild hope and despair, and made vain resolutions to break the "love chains" that were torturing him, but always returned to the ecstatic vision that enthralled him. She was still more of a vision than an actuality to him! Indeed, he probably did worship his idealization of the lady more than he did the lady herself. But, like all men in love, he did not know that.

Then, after long and anxious waiting, there came a time when she grew more kindly disposed toward him, offered him more encouragement. Perhaps one of his fervent verses, or the collection of them, had gone to her heart

or head. Maybe she dimly sensed the fact that the unrenowned youth paying surreptitious court to her was the embodiment of unrecognized genius, and that she was unconsciously playing the central role of a drama that was destined to live on through the centuries!

In any event, he found more opportunities for meeting and conversing with her, but still this lady who had given the fullness of her love to not a few favorites, refused him the ultimate prize he so dearly coveted and which he had striven so long and so ardently to gain.

No mean student of the wiles of women—and particularly of this woman whose conquest he desired above all else—he resolved that he must make a show of violence in order to attain that which she so capriciously denied to him. Lacking neither imagination nor decision when the time appeared propitious, he resolved to over-ride all obstacles and storm the fortress in her own chamber.

Bribing the maid to help him, when the master was known to be absent, he was led by the wench into *Fiammetta's* boudoir, where he hid behind the curtains of the massive bed. Soon the mistress came in with the maid, who undressed her and put her to bed. The impatient lover waited anxiously and hopefully. Long—or what seemed a very long time—after all was quiet, he came out of his hiding and found the object of his adoration sleeping as quietly and innocently as a child. Keyed up with excitement and anticipation, with heart thumping and temples burning, he crept quietly into the

great bed beside her. The supreme moment of his life, for which he had so long waited, had come at last. The soft, warm, elegant body, a matchless form of delicate contours, lay unsuspecting against his own, so successfully had he maneuvered himself into the downy depths of the marital bed.

Softly he touched the velvety skin, and kissed the most beautiful mouth it had ever been his province to look upon—had he not written imperishable odes to that very mouth! He had already subtly encircled her in his arms when she awakened. She opened her lips to make an outcry, and he closed them with kisses. She struggled to get out of bed, but he held her firmly, and sought to assuage her fears. She was vanquished, but to carry out the illusion of not yielding, she rebuked him in a trembling voice for his impulsiveness in attempting forcibly to take that which she had always denied him, assuring him that his efforts were in vain, that she was determined upon resisting him.

Giovanni, playing the drama like the incorrigible romanticist that he was, drew a dagger from his belt and withdrawing from the bed, grandly but in moderate tones declared—we take the words from the *Ameto*—"I come not, O lady, to defile the chastity of thy bed, but as an ardent lover to obtain relief for my burning desires; thou alone canst assuage them, or tell me to die: surely, I will only leave thee satisfied or dead, not that I seek to gratify my passion by violence or to compel any to raise cruel hands against me; but if thou art deaf

to my entreaties, with my dagger I shall pierce my heart."

The psychology of the act was perfect. Her room to be the scene of a lover's suicide! Never! "O no, Giovanni, thou couldn'st," or some such colloquial equivalent of our homely Elizabethan rendition, as she seemed to lapse into a timely swoon. But her face and hands and body were hot and glowing with the excitement of amorous strategy that is as old as the first rendezvous under the Eden Tree, and as new as the mad maneuvering of last night's tryst in Lovers' Lane. She had met her master. She was conquered. And by her silence her consent was indicated.

"My lady love," he breathed, "I came thus because it was pleasing to the gods . . ."

"Thou lovest me so?" she answered. "And when, then, and how, and why . . . why?" He told her briefly, hurriedly, and with burning senses of how his infatuation started, how it grew and ripened and expanded until it dominated him, literally left him with no other desire than to be all, everything, to her. She swerved between yielding and denying, hesitating, so he lifted his dagger lightly, with playful menace, whereupon *Fiammetta* seized the innocent weapon and flung it to the end of the room.

Then, putting his arms around her and smothering her lips with kisses, he whispered: "Lady, the gods, my passion, and thy beauty, have wounded my soul, and thus as was already told thee in dreams I shall forever be thine: I do not think I need implore thee to be mine,

but if necessary I pray thee now once for all . . ."

That night was the first of many meetings between these two. "Oh," reflected *Fiammetta*, in the romance that bears her name, "how he loved my room and with what joy it saw him arrive. He held it in greater reverence than any church. Ah, me, what pleasant kisses! What long embraces! How many nights passed as though they had been bright days in sweet converse without sleep! How many delights, dear to every lover, have we enjoyed there in those happy days!"

Happy days, indeed, they were—and hectic nights! Boccaccio refers to them again and again in his sonnets and romances. He describes the precious hours spent together in Naples, at the seashore in Baia, at the lakeside of Avernus, in sylvan retreats, in flower-scented gardens, in verdant, if not virgin, fields. This period was the most blissful stage of their romance, and unquestionably the happiest of Giovanni's life.

But as the perfect day must inevitably come to a close, so, too, was this season of ecstatic bliss foredoomed to pass. With the coming of the year 1338, difficulties intruded themselves which were doubly formidable because of the perfection of what preceded, and which could never be regained.

Oh, *Lasting Happiness*, most elusive of the false Gods, how naively we pursue thee, only to find we have clutched at a phantom, which even as we look disintegrates into the nebula of vanishing shadows!

Fiammetta's fickle temperament and the temptations of a decadent court were not conducive to amorous constancy—if in view of her share in the illicit romance the situation could be so termed. Boccaccio was well aware that the admirers of his lover were no more scrupulous than he, which brought no comfort to him, and her ravishing beauty basking at large among a covetous aggregation of erotic males contributed something less than no assurance whatever toward his peace of mind.

Without the least particle of material evidence, he knew he was being betrayed. He was tortured by the thought of *Fiammetta's infidelities*, for such he felt her disloyalty to him to be. He was jealous, angry, petulant. He fled the scene of his priceless memories of yesterday, which had so soon become things of bitterness, and then, unable to bear the agony of separation, suffered unnecessary dangers in hastening upon his return journey.

Love, in the flower of its erotic essence, is the most absolute and possessive of the passions. It is content only with sole possession of the object that fires it. Boccaccio had a singular capacity for this indulgence. Having the gift to love in inordinate degree, he had a corresponding capacity to suffer. Of course, he would play around with lesser beauties, and not concern himself with their previous, or subsequent, affairs, but *Fiammetta* he loved with a love that is authentically stamped with the hallmark of Jealousy, including all its tormenting implications of suspicion, anger and remorse.

In his *Filocolo*, he recurs to this devastating turmoil of the mind: "The jealous lover's soul is ever filled with infinite terrors and his pangs are not to be alleviated by hope or by any other joy. He insists on inventing and dictating laws for the feet and hands, and for every act of his mistress." And, again, "My heart was filled with such furious anger that I almost broke away from her, yet I restrained myself."

It was the beginning of the end of his infatuation for *Fiammetta* the woman—for *Fiammetta* the idealized symbol of Woman, he never lost his love, although his passion underwent the refining and softening influence of time and philosophical reflection.

The sudden onthrust of poverty, due to the misfortunes of his father upon whom he depended for financial support, seemed to be the last straw in the events leading to ruination for him. But it proved to be his artistic salvation. In the change of fortune, Giovanni's companions in his Neapolitan adventures forsook him, and he found himself without friends or means. He, an aristocrat of the mind, if not of family, who had been received at the court of nobility and loved a king's daughter was now a friendless pauper.

Boccaccio, with no remaining chains of flattery or vanity to bind him, reaffirmed his vow to the muses at the tomb of Virgil. Solitude brought him to a realization of the fact that he was a student and poet, and that, steeped in the glamorous sophistication and artificial excitement of Neapolitan high life, he had ne-

glected the deeper values upon which his heart had been set. He who, almost unaided, was to give form and life to modern literature, began the work of a Gargantuan, productive career.

His life was now irrevocably dedicated to literature, even if it was always to be influenced by the warm, iridescent personality of *Fiammetta*, and tinted by the color and life of King Robert's Court. It was at this time (about the end of the year 1340) that the sobered and determined Giovanni was summoned by his widowed father to Florence. The elder Boccaccio had lost practically everything, including the dowry of his wife, Margherita.

Giovanni, imbued with the superstition of his time, always declared this was the justice of heaven upon his father for the desertion of his own mother. From the evidence we have, it appears that Boccaccio was the illegitimate son of an unknown mother, probably a Parisienne, the result of a passing affair on the occasion of the elder Boccaccio's presence in Paris on business. He seems never to have forgiven his father for this treatment of his mother, although the practice was common enough at that period. In fact, Giovanni himself is known to have had two sons and three daughters, presumably illegitimate, by whom we do not know.

A dutiful son, Giovanni obeyed his father's summons to Florence. That his acquiescence was not due merely to the poverty of his own position is evidenced by the philosophy which he later expressed: "We ought to learn to bear the yoke of our fathers, and should honor with

the greatest reverence their trembling old age."

Florence at that time was disturbed by civil feuds, and the gloomy silence of his father's house was in very great contrast to the gay life to which he had been accustomed in Naples until so recently.

From now on, it seems, Boccaccio was able to view objectively and dispassionately his romance with *Fiammetta*, and the memories of their association must have done much to console his loneliness. Furthermore, he achieved no little vicarious satisfaction in recreating her in the immortal character of his poems and prose. Three of his works owe their existence to this period, and with all of them the old flame of his heart is concerned. She alone is the subject of one of them, *Fiammetta*, which is believed to be the last of his works directly relating to his passion for Marie d'Aquino. Students of Boccaccio consider *Fiammetta* the best thing he had achieved. The psychology is fine, subtle and full of insight, but the story is not so dramatic and profound as that in the *Filostrato*. As Hutton remarks with respect to the latter, "He shows again that he understands a woman's innermost nature, her continual doubts of herself, her gift for introspection. The torment that a deserted woman suffers, the helpless fury of jealousy, are studied and explained with marvelous knowledge and coolness. . . . It is the first novel of psychology ever written in Europe."

BOCCACCIO'S ATTITUDE TOWARD WOMEN

In order to understand Boccaccio's attitude toward women, we must take into consideration

the period in which he lived, an age that viewed woman only in the light of (1) a reproductive mechanism, (2) an amorous plaything, (3) a domestic drudge (using the latter term in the very large sense of being an all-round menial). Not only was her mentality not conceded—it was not even proposed, or suggested. Her functions were counted largely from the neck down—perhaps, even more specially, from the hips down.

Even the companionable woman of Boccaccio's day was therefore not a genuine comrade, but primarily an ornamental sexual convenience. But if there were no real intellectual or cultural opportunities open to her (outside of the fictitious ones of a cloistered religious life), man suffered for his neglect in failing to provide them. If she were a social station above the necessity of domestic drudgery, she simply used her amazing potentialities for making mischief—or so it seemed to her legitimate male connections—which was quite inevitably in some sort of erotic adventure. As every male's conquest in this field is another's cup of bitterness, it is not difficult to understand that a sensitive nature like Boccaccio's suffered much anguish from the duplicity of those ladies to whom he gave abundant, if somewhat transient, love. That he was likewise inconstant in his affections, was no balm to the wounds of his heart.

From a study of his writings, it is quite evident that while Boccaccio had many loves, he had but one really profound passion in his life, which was of course his love for *Fiammetta.*

As we have seen, his love for her was salted by the brine of jealousy, or at least it had been when the flame of passion was at its height, and he had been poisoned with wells of resentment that approximated hatred over her inconstancy. We can never be indifferent to those whom we hate, and perhaps a real first-rate hate in affairs of the heart can only spring from a soil that has been bathed in unrequited love. In any event, Boccaccio never forgot *Fiammetta;* was never, indeed, freed from the chains of the spiritual bondage that bound his emotional life up with her, even after they had long been parted. Years after their final parting, he speaks of the "discomfort and suffering" his love for her had brought him . . . "not indeed by reason of the cruelty of the beloved lady, but through the superabundant ardour engendered in the soul by ill-bridled desire, the which, as it allowed me no reasonable period of quiescence, frequently occasioned me inordinate distress."

At a period in middle life when his fame had already grown to be more than local, Boccaccio made advances to a handsome and apparently not unapproachable Florentine widow. Being little of an admirer of art for art's sake, she repelled him with contempt, if not with insult; indeed, had the indiscretion and temerity to give his letters to her more youthful lover, who showed them about the byways of Florence.

But the rash lady paid the penalty for her tactlessness. Giovanni satisfied his vengeance in a bitter satire entitled *The Corbaccio*, or

The Laberinto d'Armore, which still survives as one of the most notable and extreme documents of its kind ever penned. Written in the vigorous manner that Boccaccio could command when the occasion warranted, it slashed away with malevolence and biting sarcasm, reviling not only the lady in question, but the whole female sex. Too savagely personal and malicious to be accounted good literature, the work nevertheless became the seed of literary tradition, and bore fruit in the next century in influencing Alberti's invective *Satires* upon woman.

The story is so important in its bearing upon Boccaccio's attitude toward women, and is such an accurate index of his temperamental complexes, that the theme will bear repeating. It concerns a lover who finds himself lost in a forest of love, and is delivered by a spirit. The lover is Boccaccio; the spirit is the husband of the widow, returned from hell, where his avarice and complaisance have brought him. In directing Boccaccio the right way, the spirit reveals to him all the imperfections, artifices and defects, the hidden vices and weaknesses of his wife with the brutality and grossness that characterizes the methods of Ovid in his *Amoris Remedia*. "Had you seen her first thing in the morning with her night cap on, squatting before the fire, coughing and spitting! . . . Ah, if I could tell you how many different ways she had of dealing with that golden hair of hers, you would be amazed. Why, she spent all her time treating it with herbs and washing it with the blood of all sorts of animals. The

house was full of distillations, little furnaces, oil cups, retorts, and such litter. There wasn't an apothecary in Florence or a gardener in the environs who wasn't ordered to send her fluid silver or wild weeds . . ."

So Boccaccio continued and elaborated upon the follies and foibles of the lady who had dared to hold him up to ridicule. In his diatribe, which soon involved the whole sex, he went on: "Women have no other occupation but in making themselves appear beautiful and in winning admiration . . . all are inconstant and light, willing and unwilling in the same heart's beat unless what they wish happens to minister to their incorrigible vices. They only come into their husband's house to upset everything, to spend his money, to quarrel day and night with the servants or with his brothers and relations and children. They make out they are timid and fearful, so that if they are in a lofty place they complain of vertigo; if in a boat their delicate stomachs are upset; if we must journey by night they fear to meet ghosts; if the wind rattles the windows or they hear a pebble fall they tremble with fright; while, as you know, if one tries to do anything, to go anywhere without warning them, they are utterly contrary. But God only knows how bold and how ready they are in things to their taste. There is no place so difficult—precipices among the mountains, the highest palace walls, or the darkest night that will stop them. Their sole thought, their only object, their one ambition is to rob, to rule, and to deceive their husbands, and for this end they will stoop to everything."

BOCCACCIO'S DEBT TO PETRARCH

Boccaccio, from early manhood, entertained a deep admiration for Petrarch, which grew with the passing years and ripened into a wholehearted mutual affection. It is to the credit of both of them that their friendship was never marred by jealousy, which so often happens in the contacts, personal and professional, between two pre-eminent artists. This is all the more remarkable, because as we have already seen, Boccaccio was highly temperamental, and Petrarch not a little vain and self-conscious of his unrivaled position in the world of letters. The latter was thirteen years the senior of Boccaccio, and his leadership as poet and scholar had been fittingly acknowledged in the year 1341, when he received the laureate crown from King Robert of Anjou. He was esteemed by his contemporaries as the peer of Virgil and of Cicero.

In the autumn of 1350, when Petrarch for the first time came to Florence upon his journey to the jubilee in Rome, Boccaccio entertained him in his home. The author of the erotic classic of the Renaissance acknowledged Petrarch as his master and friend, philosopher and guide, and the latter accepted Boccaccio as his only intellectual equal.

At this time the *Decameron*, as well as the passionate works inspired by Marie d'Aquino, had been written and the course of Boccaccio's creative genius had been formed. Conditions which prevented him from becoming a major poet—a goal to which he undoubtedly aspired

beyond all else—had forced him to strike out as a pathfinder in the labyrinths of the written word. The result was the creation of Italian prose, and the invention of a form of art that has served as a model in the development of Western literature.

While Petrarch did not, or could not, influence this essential quality of Boccaccio's art, he did add seriousness to his purpose and give a wider range to his intellectual vision. From this time on, Boccaccio devoted himself more seriously to scholarship—in which Petrarch excelled—and his encyclopaedic works on geography, history, biography and mythology were written in the next twenty years. These compilations, which include the *Genealogia Deorum*, the treatise *De Mortibus*, etc., and the biographical collections issued under the titles of *De casibus virorum illustrium* and *De claris mulieribus*, are monuments to his untiring industry and enthusiasm, and performed a priceless service at this time of Europe's intellectual awakening after the dark centuries which had held mankind enthralled.

Boccaccio's reputation as a man of letters caused him to be selected by the Republic of Florence as a special envoy on various diplomatic missions. These included assignments to Romagna and Ravenna, to the Court of Tyrol and to the Papal Court. Undoubtedly, the mission which gave Boccaccio the greatest pleasure was one of a more personal character, wherein he was delegated by the Signoria of Florence to go to Padua to inform Petrarch

that the sentence of exile* under which, as a banished citizen, he had hitherto been living, and the sequestration of his hereditary property, which had been imposed, would be removed, provided he returned to Florence and placed his masterly scholarship and peerless rhetoric at the disposal of the government of his ancestral city.

In his forty-eighth year, a singular occurrence took place which throws an interesting light upon Boccaccio's character and intellectual-emotional complexes. A Carthusian monk by the name of Pietro de Petroni had died in Siena. He was famed for his piety, and on his death bed claimed to have had divinely revealed information regarding some of his most distinguished contemporaries. The gates of Heaven and Hell were opened before him in vision. He saw the ecstasy of saints and the torments of the damned. When he awoke from his rapturous contemplation, he bade a brother monk and disciple to carry a message to the persons concerned, whose sinful manner of life

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*Florence had banished Petrarch's father and confiscated all of his property that it could seize two years before the birth of his son in 1302. The exile and his young wife found refuge in the Ghibelline city of Arezzo, where Petrarch was born. Even in the year 1350, when the poet for the first time set foot in Florence, the decree of banishment was still in force upon the family of Petrarch. Had he not been famous, and enjoying wide prestige which was now his best protection, he would have been in peril of his life. Under the circumstances, Florence dare not touch him; indeed, seeing the glory that was now his, the city wished to claim a share of it by belatedly honoring him.

would doom them to eternal ruin unless they repented in time.

Among the eminent ones in need of warning was Boccaccio, to whom the ambassador of divine revelation came in Florence and communicated the terrifying message. The effect upon Boccaccio was electrifying. At the first impulse, he determined to abandon study, to dispose of his library, to destroy, as far as it were possible, his light and amorous works of fiction and poetry, and finally to enter some monastery or priestly order.

Fortunately, before proceeding with any of these resolutions, he wrote to Petrarch, whose advice above all others he valued, for counsel. In due course the answer arrived, firm in tone, sound in judgment, combining reason, wisdom and sympathy. With rare insight into human nature, and a rational turn of mind in an age of superstition and credulity, he reasoned against the authority of death-bed revelations. Knowing his correspondent as he did, he admitted it would be well for Boccaccio to mend his ways in certain respects and to cultivate a more serious attitude toward life. He impressed upon him, too, that the vocation of literature was not incompatible with sane, orderly and upright living. This sagely counsel, kindly yet admonitory, coming from a man esteemed for his ascetic ideals, completely stabilized the wavering Boccaccio. He kept his beloved library and continued his studies in philology. He did not take the religious vows, although he is said to have selected the Carthusian Order as the channel in which to give

expression to the upwelling of piety that the threat of eternal damnation had caused to rise within him.

From this time of his so-called conversion, Boccaccio lived a more temperate life and abandoned the writing of erotic poems and prose. Indeed, he seems to have done what he could to discourage the reading of his *Decameron.* In a letter to Maghinardo de Cavalcanti, he asserted his belief that this robust work might lead women astray by its seductions. This solicitude for *weak woman* (*sic*), of course, not only reflected the attitude of the reformed Boccaccio toward womankind, but it represented the prevailing code of chivalry of his time. In practice, it usually implied that the amorous male considered that woman needed protection from every man but himself.

We have stressed the influence of Petrarch upon Boccaccio, and referred to the deep admiration of the latter for the former. Perhaps Petrarch's very great and sincere regard for Boccaccio can best be indicated by his own account of their first meeting, viz: "In days gone by," he wrote in a letter to Boccaccio, "I was hurrying across Central Italy in midwinter; you hastened to greet me, not only with affection, the message of soul to soul, but in person, impelled by a wonderful desire to see one you had never yet beheld, but whom nevertheless you were minded to love. You had sent before you a piece of beautiful verse, thus showing me first the aspect of your genius, and then of your person. It was evening and the sun was fading, when, returning from my long

exile, I found myself at last within my native walls. You welcomed me with a courtesy and respect greater than I merited, recalling the poetic meeting of Anchises with the king of Arcadia, who, 'in the ardor of youth' longed to speak with the hero and to press his hand. Although I did not, like him, stand 'above all others,' but rather beneath, your zeal was none the less ardent. You introduced me, not within the walls of Pheneus, but into the sacred portals of your friendship. Nor did I present you with a 'superb quiver and arrows of Lycia,' but rather with my sincere and unchangeable affection. While acknowledging my inferiority in many respects, I will never willingly concede it in this either to Nisus or to Pythias or to Laelius.—Farewell."

Thus was the beginning of a friendship that lasted nearly a quarter of a century, a friendship so rare that Filippo Villani remarked they were "One soul in two bodies." Certainly, the news in 1374 of Petrarch's death proved a blow from which his closest friend never fully recovered, and Boccaccio's responsive heart was forever stilled on December 21, 1375.

The illuminating careers of two individuals are woven through the warp and woof of Boccaccio's life of impulse and achievement—Petrarch was the guiding light of his intellectual destiny, and *Fiammetta*, the unfading star of his emotional and love life. Long after her splendid body and radiant beauty had surrendered to death, her influence over him and his work lived on and has become crystalized into the immortality that is Boccaccio's.

The lady of his supreme passion was never forgotten, that we know. There are innumerable passages to remind us that the exquisite lines of the sonnet commemorizing his last sight of *Fiammetta*, recorded after her death, remained always engraven upon the impressionable matrix of his heart, viz:

Round her red garland and her golden hair
I saw a fire about Fiammetta's head;
Thence to a little cloud I watched it fade,
Than silver or than gold more brightly fair;
And like a pearl that a gold ring doth bear,
Even so an angel sat therein, who sped
Alone and glorious throughout heaven, array'd
In sapphires and in gold that lit the air.
Then I rejoiced as hoping happy things,
Who rather should have then discerned how God
Had haste to make my lady all His own,
Even as it came to pass. And with these stings
Of sorrow, and with life's most weary load
I dwell, who fain would be where she is gone.